

Political Update: Electoral Coalition

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Democracy Resource Center Nepal (DRCN)

Elections for the House of Representatives (HoR) and provincial assemblies are being held on November 20, 2022. Through these elections, a total of 275 members will be elected—165 through direct elections, and 110 through proportional representation—in the HoR.¹ In all seven provinces, elections will be held to choose members of the respective provincial assembly through direct elections and proportional representation.² As the date for elections approaches, political parties have become busy with election activities. There is a sharp polarization between political parties, they are engaged in building coalitions. On one side are Nepali Congress (NC), Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Center) [CPN (MC)], Janata Samajvadi Party (JSP), Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Socialist) [CPN (US)], and Rashtriya Jana Morach (RJM), who are preparing to contest the elections as a five-party

coalition across the country.³ Similarly, Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxists-Leninists) [CPN (UML)] is also in dialogue with political parties like Rashtriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) and Loktantrik Samajvadi Party (LSP) at the central and local level to form electoral alliances according to necessity.

This political update focuses on electoral activities of political parties, and their coalition-building efforts and effects of coalitions. This political update has been prepared based on interviews with political party leaders and cadres, media persons and citizens of Dadeldhura and Doti districts of Sudurpashchim Province, Tanahun and Gorkha districts of Gandaki Province, Chitwan and Makwanpur districts of Bagmati Province, and Rautahat, Sarlahi, Mahottari and Dhanusha districts of Madhesh Province.⁴

¹ Of the 275 members of the House of Representatives, 165 members are elected according to the ‘first-past-the-post’ electoral system, with one candidate representing each of the 165 constituencies across Nepal, which have been created on the basis of demography and geography. The remaining 110 members are elected according to the ‘proportional representation’ electoral system which treats the entire country as a single constituency, and allocates seats in proportion to the total votes received by each political party. When political parties recommend their candidates under the ‘proportional representation’ system, constitutional provisions require that they present a closed list of candidates which includes women, Dalits, indigenous ethnicities, Khas-Arya, Madheshi, Tharu, Muslim, and backward regions in proportion to their part in the population.

² In each province, twice as many candidates as the number of HoR members elected through the ‘first-past-the-post’ electoral system from a constituency are also elected to the provincial assembly under the same system. That number is considered 60 percent of the total number of members of the provincial assembly, while the remaining 40 percent are elected through the ‘proportional representation’ system. When political parties recommend their candidates under the ‘proportional representation’ system, constitutional provisions require that they present a closed list of candidates which includes women, Dalits, indigenous ethnicities, Khas-Arya, Madheshi, Tharu, Muslim, and backward regions in proportion to their part in the population.

³ Defying the Constitution of Nepal 2015, the erstwhile Prime Minister Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli (KP Oli) dissolved the House of Representatives on December 20, 2020. The Constitutional Bench of the Supreme Court, responding to a writ petition filed against the dissolution of the House of Representatives, passed a decision ordering the reinstatement of the House of Representatives. On May 22, 2021, the erstwhile Prime Minister KP Oli dissolved the House of Representatives for a second time. A total of 146 members of the House of Representatives, which included members from the Madhav Kumar Nepal faction of Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist) [CPN (UML)], Nepali Congress, Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist Centre), Janata Samajvadi Party and Rashtriya Jana Morcha, presented themselves before the Supreme Court in person to file a writ petition against KP Oli’s move to dissolve the House of Representatives. The Supreme Court ordered the reinstatement of the House of Representatives for the second time, and issued a mandamus to appoint Sher Bahadur Deuba as the prime minister. Once Sher Bahadur Deuba was appointed the prime minister, the Madhav Kumar Nepal faction broke away from the CPN (UML) to form Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Socialist). Thereafter, the five parties which had stood against the dissolution of the House of Representatives formed the five-party coalition.

⁴ For this study, Democracy Resource Center Nepal researchers visited these districts between September 12–24, 2022.

Preparation by political party

Political parties engaged in election-centered activities in each of the constituencies reached by Democracy Resource Center Nepal (DRCN). District committees have collected lists of candidates for the House of Representatives (HoR) and for provincial assemblies from their respective constituency and forwarded them to provincial committees, which have in turn forwarded them to central committees.

Nepali Congress (NC) had directed district committees to recommend the name of three candidates for proportional representation, including a woman candidate. But DRCN was told that there was no mandatory provision to recommend women candidates for directly elected positions. A NC leader from Chitwan said that lists of candidates recommended for both directly elected position and proportional representation had been sent to the party's central office. In one HoR constituency of Chitwan, a total of 25 candidates had been recommended for proportional representation, while up to 42 candidates had been recommended from one constituency of the provincial assembly. CPN (UML) had directed district committees to recommend three candidates, including a woman, for directly elected position from each HoR constituency. In HoR constituency 3 of Chitwan, the candidate for directly elected position had been recommended unanimously, while three candidates, including one woman candidate each, had been recommended to the center for the remaining two constituencies respectively. Regarding proportional representation, the CPN (UML) district chairperson for Chitwan said that priority lists of 11 candidates for the HoR and 45 candidates for the Provincial Assembly of Bagmati Province had been forwarded to the center.

A political party representative said that activities like training cadres and forming booth committees were being carried out in order to facilitate cadre

mobilization during the elections. Many who had claimed candidacy were engaged in meeting with party cadres, and giving interviews on various media outlets. Independent candidates were also engaged in election activities. Some parties informed that they were carrying out internal survey through their party committees to determine how many votes they would get.

Attempt at building coalition

A center-level agreement had been reached in the five-party coalition to maintain their coalition across all constituencies. However, the coalition parties had not been able to reach a mutual agreement regarding the distribution of constituencies. Amid the confusion regarding which party would receive which constituencies, each political party involved in the coalition had recommend its own candidates for each constituency. For instance, in HoR constituency 1 of Rautahat, although it was being said that Madhav Kumar Nepal, the chairperson of CPN (US), was guaranteed to be fielded as the coalition candidate, NC had recommended Krishna Prasad Yadav as a candidate from the same constituency. In the single electoral constituency of Doti, three parties within the coalition—NC, CPN (MC), and CPN (US)—had claimed candidacy each.

The CPN (UML) was also strategically coordinating with various political parties as per its needs. In HoR constituency 3 of Chitwan, it is widely discussed that the CPN (UML) would coordinate with RPP to oppose the CPN (MC) chairperson Prachanda. However, Ram Prasad Nyeupane, Chitwan district chairperson for CPN (UML), and the candidate recommended from the constituency to the HoR, said that the constituency must field a CPN (UML) candidate. Similarly, DRCN was told that the CPN (UML) and Nepali Congress (BP)

were coordinating in order to defeat NC Chairperson and Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba at any cost.

Political leader and cadre's perspective of coalition

Political leaders who had better chances of obtaining candidacy within the five-party coalition advocated for the coalition. They argued that the unconstitutional moves by Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli (KP Oli) to dissolve the HoR twice, in contravention of the Constitution, necessitated the five-party coalition in order to safeguard the Constitution. A CPN (US) leader in Dadeldhura said, "Five-party coalition is an attempt to safeguard the Constitution of Nepal. It should be maintained until the risk of regression by the CPN (UML) is mitigated." Leaders of the five-party coalition also argued that the coalition was necessary because it was not possible for a single political party to secure an outright majority in the parliaments.

However, both the five-party coalition, and the potential CPN (UML) led alliance as per its local needs, had engendered dissatisfaction among party leaders and cadres. Such dissatisfaction was especially prevalent among NC leaders and cadres, and especially more so across districts of Madhesh Province. Leaders and cadres of JSP were also found to especially disapprove of the coalition.

NC political leaders and cadres argued that NC was capable of obtaining favorable results in the elections even if it contested them alone, since the party has always had a strong organizational presence across Madhesh Province. However, because of the coalition, NC was being required to assist other political parties. For instance, an NC leader said that there were preparations to give candidacy to other parties in three of the four HoR constituencies in Mahottari district. Attempts were ongoing in Mahottari to offer

Constituency 3 to LSP leader Mahantha Thakur in order to bring LSP into the five-party coalition. Similarly, it was said that constituencies 1 and 4 of the same district were being offered to CPN (MC) and JSP. If that happened, NC would get only Constituency 2. NC cadres and supporters in Dhanusha were angry that something similar was being done in their district. Cadres held the opinion that the top leadership had ignored the organizational strength of NC and local needs of the constituency while entering the coalition to serve narrow and selfish interests. An NC political leader from Mahottari expressed their dissatisfaction thus:

I have given by blood and sweat over the past 40 years to build the organizational structure of Nepali Congress. There are five other persons in our ward who have been active for the past 40 years to build the organizational structure for Nepali Congress. What sort of a coalition is this, which prevents us, in the name of the coalition, from voting for Nepali Congress? What sort of a democratic process is the coalition trying to build? This coalition has little to do with specific principles or issues, and has been formed purely out of the self-interest of the top leadership. In the name of the coalition, Sher Bahadur Deuba seeks to secure the continuation of his prime ministerial post after elections. But the barter for this position has sacrificed the political future of Nepali Congress cadres. The priority of Nepali Congress should be to protect its organizational structure; only then should it seek to win elections. But the organizational structure is being destroyed in the name of a coalition aimed at winning elections. This coalition is a slow-poison which will gradually push Nepali Congress to its deathbed.

NC leaders and cadres argued that the coalition would result in great losses for NC, while benefitting other political parties. They argued that even though other member parties of the coalition like CPN (MC), CPN (US), and JSP are organizationally becoming weaker, and that their leaders have become ineffectual, the assistance they receive from NC will revive their political careers. They appeared disappointed with their political future because they were being denied the opportunity for political competition in the name of the coalition.

Effect of coalition

Individuals who have the possibility of receiving candidacy tickets through the coalition were very excited. Those whose chances were low were worried that on the one hand, their party would have to give up candidacy, and on the other hand, they were concerned that their supporters would have to cast votes for the opposition party's election symbol. Candidates were found to have quit their political party after realizing that they would not receive candidacy tickets due to the coalition. This was most prevalent in Madhesh Province. Realizing that their chance of receiving candidacy opportunities from their parties was shrinking, some individuals quit NC and JSP and entered CPN (UML). Additionally, NC leaders in Sarlahi and Mahottari had warned that they would field rebel candidates in those districts if coalition parties other than NC were allowed to field candidates there. NC leaders said that the youth leaders were especially disheartened after realizing, despite having devoted long years to political participation, that they would be denied candidacy opportunities because of the coalition. Political leader Methur Chaudhary of Baburam Bhattarai led Nepal Samajvadi Party, Sarlahi, said that he had quit the party and entered CPN (UML) solely with the intention of obtaining a candidacy

ticket. "When I saw the Nepal Samajvadi Party leader Mahendra Rai Yadav lobbying for a ticket through the coalition, I realized that I would not receive a ticket. CPN (UML) leaders approached me repeatedly to offer me a candidacy ticket. I have been recommended as a candidate for the provincial assembly from provincial assembly constituency 2 (b) of Sarlahi. I am guaranteed to receive the ticket," Chaudhary said. However, even within CPN (UML), leaders and cadres were dissatisfied to see that party members who have spent a lot of time building up the party organization were being sidelined while new members were being handed candidacy tickets. A CPN (UML) leader from Madhesh Province said sarcastically, "The leaders are giving the *tika* mark of blessing with one hand and handing tickets with the other hand to new entrants in the party."

Dissatisfaction being addressed

Since political parties are contesting the election through coalitions, they are forced to give up the constituency of their choice to another party in the coalition. Supporters of the coalition said that if tickets to the HoR and provincial assemblies could be distributed judiciously among individuals and parties, it might be possible to mitigate the dissatisfaction among them, and that the election results would favor the coalition. The CPN (MC) chairperson Prachanda won from Constituency 3 of Chitwan district in the previous election. Additionally, the CPN (MC) also won constituency 3 (b) for the provincial assembly. The CPN (MC) had laid claim to the same constituency for this year's elections, too. However, NC leaders in Chitwan said that dissatisfied leaders and cadres could be managed if both provincial assembly constituencies 3 (a) and 3 (b) were allocated to NC. An NC leader from HoR constituency 3 said, "We should have the opportunity to vote for our own party." Similarly, in Rautahat, leaders of two parties in the coalition, NC

and JSP, said that they were ready to give up the HoR seat to Madhav Kumar Nepal and also to assist him in the election. However, the singular condition put forward by leaders of both parties was that their parties should get the candidacy for the provincial assembly seats from that constituency.

Conclusion

Leaders and cadres of political parties have become extremely busy since the date for elections to the HoR and provincial assemblies was announced. Parties were busy with electoral arithmetic. There were many individuals hoping to receive candidacy, while the seats remain limited. Moreover, politicians were in the difficult position of having to give up their seats to other political parties in the name of the coalition. Since top leadership in the parties appeared to be building

coalitions or mutually cooperating out of narrow self-interest rather than based on ideology or principles, there was extreme dissatisfaction among the rank and file of political parties. Ire toward the coalition was especially pronounced among Nepali Congress cadres. There are indications that the dissatisfaction of cadres, and leaders of political parties which will be denied candidacy tickets, will surface soon once the working committee in charge of distributing seats between the five-party coalition members completes its task and decides which party will get to contest from which constituency, for which assembly. When that happens, the number of candidates who will switch political parties just to bargain for candidacy tickets will increase on the one hand, while on the other hand, the number of rebel candidates challenging the five-party coalition or parties engaging in strategic alliance as per their necessity will also increase. This may lead to results that defy present expectations.

